

WATER, FOOD AND CLIMATE COMMONING IN SOUTH AFRICAN CITIES

Contradictions and prospects

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Introduction

Social change has occurred unevenly in South Africa, with adverse implications for the strategy of ‘commoning.’¹ The framing of a commons is not as popular in this extremely unequal society as are various versions of ‘Right to the City’ narratives, or simply the informal and mainly illegal appropriation of state-supplied services, especially water and electricity, sometimes in the wake of the thousands of ‘service delivery protests’ that occur each year. The narrow, constitutionalist framings of rights are most often articulated by lawyers supporting low-income people in these struggles, while other organizers (e.g. Ngwane, 2009) have taken up a more expansive argument consistent with arguments made by Henri Lefebvre (1996) or David Harvey (2012). The direction the latter may go, if the ‘popcorn protests’ can be linked up more effectively, could be towards a new version of mutual-aid philosophy often considered within the ‘eco-socialist,’ feminist and decolonizing traditions of radical South African politics. To understand the concrete form these are taking, it is useful first to frame these as contestations of the commons.

Progressive movements have regularly expressed a desire to expand various kinds of commons, especially those that are connected with nature (water, air, land, sub-soil resources), ideas (humanity’s intellectual and cultural traditions), society (the mixing of peoples through regional migrations) and state services (water/sanitation, electricity, social services, healthcare, education, etc.). The most crucial South African example is represented by the successful commoning of intellectual property over Anti-Retroviral Medicines (ARVs), which led to free provision of AIDS medicines through the public service since 2004. Earlier, ARVs were too costly for anyone aside from a few thousand individual healthcare customers (nearly all white) in the private sector. By 2018, with four million receiving the ARVs for free, life expectancy soared from 52 (in 2004) to 64 (Bond, 2014).

There have also been illustrative commons struggles for water decommodification, free tertiary education financing, access to land and nature and resistance against society’s xenophobic tendencies. The neoliberal era’s enclosing movements often were accompanied by counter-movements (as predicted by Polanyi, 1957). In South Africa, they could claim partially successful efforts to decommodify, defend or expand state- or mutually-owned or managed goods and services, including free basic water and electricity.

Two standard economistic ideas that are typically applied to commons processes, namely ‘merit goods’ and ‘public goods’ (e.g. Ostrom, 1990), are not only dangerously localistic and small-scale in orientation (Harvey, 2012). They are also weak versions of the concept, for they hardly capture the radical political essence of South Africa’s struggle over the commons. Over millennia in this region, commons have been constructed through mutual aid termed ‘Ubuntu’ – meaning ‘we are who we are through each other’ – and then deconstructed through slavery, colonialism, apartheid, patriarchy, neoliberal commodification, social atomization and the broader process of uneven development (Smith, 1984; Bond and Ruiters, 2017).

This chapter focuses on urban commoning in South African cities as both a survival strategy and potential eco-socialist project. Through this example it draws out aspects of a potential counter-movement against neoliberalism that will evolve through small-scale experimentation, social-democratic public policy and – in some cases already – a broader framing of radical politics. We read this as an expression of political commoning: building commons spaces as a transformative politics (Ferrando and Vivero-Pol, 2017). However, the cases considered below can also be considered as a contradictory mode of social commoning, which Vivero-Pol (2017) describes as following a pathway of either political disaffection in which people are not yet engaged in broader political struggles, or of ‘political activism and self-awareness of working at the community level but with a greater (counter-hegemonic) global objective.’

In this chapter, we examine the background to the commoning of water, food and climate adaptation. When combined – as Naomi Klein (2014) recommends in *This Changes Everything* – as an eco-socialist strategy, there are inklings of a new social movement ideology in the otherwise fragmented South African urban context. At the same time, however, we also explore contradictions of this approach within the present socio-political context: fragmentation of struggles, geographical and scale tensions and differential radical and liberal approaches especially applied to juridical, rights-based strategies. The idea of the commons could transcend these contradictions, as shown in the struggles for water, food and air as manifestations of prefigurative politics.

The chapter is based upon both authors’ experiences as scholar-activists over the last thirty years in Johannesburg and Durban, but mainly relies upon the organic expressions of township residents who exhibit both socialist and capitalist behaviour. Together, these undermine the state’s strategies for what are essentially neoliberal modes of water delivery, a non-existent food policy and minimalist climate adaptation. The lessons from these commons strategies point us to both the pathway and the potholes en route to building eco-socialism, especially in the world’s most unequal cities.

History, struggles and contemporary conditions in urban South Africa

Since its origin in the 1920s, the anti-apartheid movement’s strengths have always been linked with explicitly urban (and urbanizing) social and labour collectivities. Anti-apartheid resistance was unlike most other anti-colonial movements in Africa, which had a stronger rural than urban base. Although the 1955 Freedom Charter led by the African National Congress (ANC) called for a modernizing social democracy, there was also a strong communist presence within the ANC, along with a powerful labour contingent. After the state’s 1960s imprisonment of liberation movement leaders and repression of civil society, urban trade unions began re-organizing during the early 1970s (Baskin, 1991).

By the mid-1980s, most cities also witnessed the rise of powerful ‘civic associations’ based in the black townships. In 1992, they forged a network called the South African National Civic Organization (SANCO), joining the broader front known as the Mass Democratic Movement. Most community leaders were also labour leaders who, due to apartheid segregation, lived

side-by-side in townships with poor people and an aspiring middle class. In that context, SANCO's resistance principles, analyses, strategies, tactics and allies reflected a collectivist, proto-socialist identity, often pitted directly against the neoliberal capitalist approach of the state and its corporate allies (Bond, 2000, 2014; Mayekiso, 1996). SANCO's loose federal form experienced perpetual problems of movement coordination, yet nearly all the urban civics pursued an agenda that conjoined democratization, deracialization and developmental demands (Mayekiso, 1996).

These demands were in part reflected in the 1994 *Reconstruction and Development Programme* adopted by the African National Congress (ANC) and its Alliance partners. The programme included detailed visions of access to decommodified housing and associated services. The various promises relating to urban restructuring were progressive and ambitious (Bond 2000) – but were nearly universally broken once the ANC took power (Bond and Khosa, 1999). Within a few years, SANCO degenerated into a junior partner of the ANC, with little impact on the wave of urban revolts against neoliberal public policy that began in the late 1990s (Heller and Ntlokonkulu, 2001; Mayekiso, 1996; Seekings, 1997; Zuern, 2004).

Those policies have generated dire socio-economic conditions. According to Josh Budlender, Ingrid Woolard and Murray Leibbrandt (2015), the poverty rate is 63 percent, far higher than the 45 percent level of 1994. As for inequality, over the first two decades of freedom, the market-income Gini coefficient level was 0.77, the world's highest (World Bank, 2014). Unemployment soared from 16 to 25 percent from 1994 to 2014 and, adding those who gave up looking for jobs, brought the rate to 35 percent (Bond, 2014). At the same time, extremely high increases in fees for consuming basic state services (especially electricity and water) began to kick in, creating the conditions for intense urban unrest. Johannesburg is typically considered (Razvadauskas, 2017) the world's 'most unequal major city,' with Durban and Cape Town not far behind. In this context, the water, food and climate inequalities necessarily called for movements for social justice.

Divergent double-movement responses in South African cities

The neoliberal era is characterized by the 'movement' of capital into every form of life. In reaction, a 'double-movement' – as Karl Polanyi (1957) termed such resistance – can be identified in several sectors that were especially important in South Africa's cities. Although food commoning has been limited, several struggles for decommodified water and clean air suggest the enormous potential of constructing resistance around the notion of the commons. But there are also quite profound contradictions to confront, including ideological contradictions. Urban social movements did not respond to the post-apartheid neoliberal policy terrain with a consistent 'Polanyian' double-movement, mainly because of confusing political subjectivities (Bond, 2014; Duncan, 2016; Ngwane, 2017). In addition, if the Polanyian schema is applied to water, the complex South African situation in which it is partially commodified and partially decommodified allows for diverse types of struggle to qualify as double-movement activism (Galvin, 2016).

As SANCO's mid-1990s demobilization progressed, disruptive and often violent 'service delivery protests' emerged in the vacuum. These became ubiquitous, starting in Johannesburg and quickly moving as far afield as several small Eastern Cape towns during the late 1990s then rising into thousands of demonstrations measured by police and researchers annually (Duncan, 2016; Ngwane, 2017; Runciman et al., 2016). Starting in the late 1990s, 'new social movements' rose in the main cities. There was a general expectation that they would muster the strength to network nationally with increasingly cross-sectoral connections (e.g. combining the drive to decommodify AIDS medicines, water and electricity in a unifying way).

The most impressive social movement was the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) which, from 1999, rose against the state's refusal to provide AIDS medicines to six million HIV+ citizens. At the time anti-retrovirals cost \$10,000 per person annually. After an intense struggle that entailed battles against the World Trade Organization, Big Pharma and the US and South African governments, AIDS treatment was, from 2004, provided for free in state clinics, using generic medicines (Mbali, 2013). This can be considered South Africa's main example of social commoning, for it entailed the decommodification of medicines, the deglobalization of their production (in India's and then Africa's generic drugs factories) and the globalization of people involved in solidarity with TAC, including the US group ACTUP!, African activists, *Médicins sans Frontières* and Oxfam. While there were new opportunities herein for South Africa's main generics company, Aspen, to accumulate capital, making its chief executive a billionaire, the activists' ability to shift the terms of debate on intellectual property, so as to common life-saving ideas and technologies, was nothing short of miraculous, as reflected in the high life-expectancy increase in South Africa and all other countries with high HIV+ incidence (Mbali, 2013).

Other social movements arose and took stands that were highly visible but did not obtain notable successes. Fighting rural inequality, the Landless People's Movement emerged in 2001 to demand land redistribution in the wake of Zimbabwe's 'jambanja' occupations of most white farms (Ntsebeza, 2011; Shonhe, 2018). In a similar anti-colonial and anti-land concentration vein, the critique of apartheid-era debt repayment and profit repatriation was put at the center of the demands advanced by the Jubilee 2000 movement, Khulumani Support Group and their allies. Their ultimately unsuccessful claim for reparations from multinational corporations went as far as the US Supreme Court (Bond, 2003). Moreover, police repression (Bond, 2014) had a lot to do with the difficulties faced by these movements.

In other cases, proponents of environmental justice embarked upon a series of discrete campaigns that were occasionally networked, increasingly against mining industry exploitation and urban pollution (Bond, 2002; Cock, 2011; Womin, 2018). These could be interpreted as attempts to achieve ecological local paradigms through the commoning of nature and society. However, many social movement activists and supporters who expected mass support for social movements to grow and to translate into a socialist political project found their expectations dashed (Bond et al., 2013). In this environment of disappointment, debates emerged about the role of romantic academic activists in these movements, some of whom were prone to ventriloquism, substitutionism and careerism (Mdlalose, 2014; Bond, 2015).

Still, substantial achievements were recorded by the two most fiercely anti-neoliberal urban movements: the Anti-Privatization Forum (APF), focused largely on Gauteng and comprised of 19 affiliate members as of 2004, and the Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) shackdwellers movement, which began in 2005 during anti-eviction battles in the Durban shack settlement Kennedy Road and continued experiencing life-and-death conflicts with municipal neoliberals and security forces into 2018. In Cape Town and other major cities, the resistance movements were more fragmented, and this is one reason it has been difficult for visionary organizers to link climate politics, even in sites (like Cape Town) suffering extreme drought and water shortages.

The movements prided themselves on having a stronger political orientation than typical service delivery protesters. In Johannesburg, the APF affiliates initially defined themselves as ideologically heterogeneous and dismissed predetermined political or ideological programmes. Their objective was:

to bring together the collective struggles of poor/working class communities against the devastating effects of capitalist neoliberalism in South Africa ... (so as) to effect

fundamental shifts in the basic service/needs policies of the state so that the majority of South Africans can enjoy the full realization of their basic human needs and rights.

(cited in McKinley, 2016)

Later, APF adopted ‘socialism’ as its constitutional objective, which was an unusual ideological commitment. As Ashwin Desai (2006) explains, South Africa’s ‘movements of the poor must be celebrated for being what they are: relatively small groupings of awakening antagonism in a sea of political apathy, nationalist ignorance and informal repression.’ The APF was pragmatic and – like the TAC – raised its members’ awareness about the national Constitution’s socio-economic rights clauses. They fought for the recognition of rights as part of their overall strategy, including recourse to the courts for injunctions and even major history-making claims upon the state (Runciman, 2012). In the case of the decommmodified AIDS medicines won by TAC, this proto-socialist success was consistent with a saying attributed to the assassinated South African Communist Party (SACP) leader Chris Hani: ‘Socialism is not about big concepts and heavy theory. Socialism is about decent shelter for those who are homeless. It is about water for those who have no safe drinking water. It is about healthcare’ (*Sunday Independent*, 2016).

However, crucial to commons strategies is that these basic services are delivered in a decommmodified, destratified manner by either the state or by mutual-aid systems (such as cooperatives, ideally worker-controlled) that get sufficiently generous state subsidies. Without these, there is the danger that housing markets dependent upon bank financing, water privatizers, for-profit health care, pre-paid (commercially-tariffed) electricity meters, private schools and similar intrusions of capitalism will continue weakening – not strengthening – the commoning project. Hence some activists contend that these battles to common – by decommmodification and destratification – the basic requirements of daily reproduction are part of a slow-but-sure movement toward socialism; the SACP’s slogan is, ‘The future is socialism, build it today.’

While it is often prophesied that anti-neoliberal mass-democratic urban movements could not be sustained (Bond et al., 2013), the APF deserves closer attention in part because of the path-breaking work its affiliates – especially the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee – did in order to decommmodify water, which is central to the commons project and also closely related to food commoning (McKinley, 2016; Mirafab and Wills, 2015; Runciman, 2012). After a decade of struggle, which is in itself a success for any social movement, the APF achieved levels of political activism and conscientization which stand out in post-1994 South Africa. Moreover, both organizers and members had a critical aim: not simply to support localized struggles but to develop the linkages between these struggles and between activists. They also built a cadre of activists with a vision of what local struggles mean at a national and global level in an increasingly commodified world and reached out regularly to international allies.

Crises emerged, however, which led to the APF’s demise not long after Jacob Zuma became president in 2009, according to its former treasurer Dale McKinley (2012): ‘Zuma’s politics created both short-term confusion and a variegated “turn” away from independent movement-community politics and struggle towards institutionalized party politics and a creeping (Zuma-inspired) social conservatism, individualism.’ As discussed below in a Durban case study (Mzinyathi), individualism is the dominant strategy for survival, even where people continue to protest collectively. In short, the private politics of survival crowded out the potential for commoning in even the strongest urban social movement.

In Durban, Joel Kovel (2007: 251) initially identified an AbM strategy ‘to recreate commons’ as ‘a modern simulacrum of the Paris Commune,’ both in the shackdwellers’ demands for housing and for access to water (Galvin, 2016). However, the vocabulary of the commons was often hidden or translated into the paradigm of human rights, which itself experienced limitations

when water was tested in the Constitutional Court in 2009. The differences between a narrow, constitutionalist 'Right to the City' and the more expansive possibilities of eco-socialist commoning were explored in Johannesburg, especially, in a Constitutional Court case that ended in failure.

Water rights litigating versus activist commoning

Whether in shacks, townships, inner city slums or South Africa's other stressed urban and peri-urban settings, in the early 2000s a turn to constitutional strategies become attractive to donors, NGOs, social movements and their legal advisors. Given the long history of civil disobedience and intense confrontations with the apartheid state, the use of rights discourse became one of the main narratives dissidents used to challenge government policy and practice after 1994. However, Erik Swyngedouw (2014) has correctly pointed out that the uncritical adoption of a litigative approach to rights enforcement readily fits into a 'neoliberal tyranny of participatory governance,' even in a state with a liberal democratic constitution like South Africa. If the liberals' rights strategies were effective, that would make it more difficult for more radical commons approaches.

The limits of merely constitutionalist framings of rights – instead of practical commoning – became evident in the case *Mazibuko v Johannesburg Water*. Supported by the APF and its allies in the broader Coalition Against Water Privatization (2009), the legal battle is illustrative of the limitations of liberalism. The lower courts declared unconstitutional Johannesburg's commodified water strategy – originally established by the French firm Suez during its 2000–06 management contract – on the grounds that pre-payment meters and the meagre 25 litres per person per day allotment of Free Basic Water were insufficient for a dignified life.²

In 2008, the High Court agreed with APF that 50 litres were required and the judge also banned pre-payment meters, a decision confirmed in the Supreme Court (though with 42, not 50, litres specified). In the Constitutional Court (2009), however, Judge Kate O'Regan confirmed the conservative character of juridical sensibilities in refusing to make detailed policy recommendations, and in finding that Johannesburg Water had exercised its duties of expanding rights on an incremental, affordable basis (Roithmayr, 2011). It was not only this outcome, but also the process of litigating rights that angered APF activists like Trevor Ngwane (2003). What happened to the struggle for water in Johannesburg can be seen as a case of the 'domestication' of the politics of need, which according to Tshepo Madlingozi (2007) entails taking militants off the street and putting them into courts. There, activist arguments had to be panel-beat, removing any progressive and quasi-socialist intent. Even attempts to draw connections to ecological factors such as the overconsumption of water by wealthy residents would not have served the purposes of narrow legal argumentation, and so they were omitted.

Another critical legal scholar, Marius Pieterse (2007), complained that 'the transformative potential of rights is significantly thwarted by the fact that they are typically formulated, interpreted, and enforced by institutions that are embedded in the political, social, and economic *status quo*.' Daniel Brand (2005) added, 'The law, including adjudication, works in a variety of ways to destroy the societal structures necessary for politics, to close down space for political contestation.' Brand specifically accuses courts of depoliticizing poverty by casting cases 'as private or familial issues rather than public or political.' In sum, following the Critical Legal Scholarship tradition, rights talk is only conjuncturally and contingently useful (Roithmayr, 2011).

The case of *Mazibuko v Johannesburg Water* raises the question of whether to dismiss rights as a narrative and courts as a terrain and to instead pursue commoning alone (e.g. illegal reconnection of water supplies) or whether to use juridical strategies when the appropriate conjuncture

arises, while steering clear of rights as a foundational argument. The APF and its Johannesburg allies ultimately wasted time, energy and vast resources in pursuing juridical justice under the impression that they had genuine water rights (Bond, 2013). In contrast, movements, such as the TAC and AbM, developed diverse juridical strategies that used socio-economic rights in both an offensive way – when TAC won nevirapine access (to prevent HIV transmission between a pregnant woman and new-born child) in a 2002 Constitutional Court decision – and for defensive purposes – when AbM had the provincial Slums Act declared unconstitutional in 2009 because it had no provisions for rehousing displaced communities. Similarly, rights-based injunctions were sought by some local groups such as the Westcliff Flat Residents Association in a way to combine litigation with protest. In a seminal 2001 case, their attempt to prevent water disconnections was initially supported by a lower court but then overturned on appeal by the state. Nevertheless, the Association gained from the experience and retained confidence to regularly challenge the municipality for further socio-economic concessions (Galvin, 2016). What these cases suggest is that strategies for each conjunctural circumstance must be considered on their own merits.

Scaling-up the commons: the localist dangers

Another challenge to constructing a genuine ‘Right to the City’ (Harvey, 2012; Lefebvre, 1996) is the persistently localistic focus of most urban activists. Their failure to develop wider linkages with other likeminded groups in South Africa was, for obvious reasons, related to the way apartheid had used zoning boundaries as race-based barriers to mobility. So, their own township or the shack settlement remain the immediate terrain of struggle for most community activists, even though there is little doubt that the stingy Treasury central budget and national-level neo-liberal policies can be blamed for so many of the country’s urban problems.

The question of how, whether and to what extent local protests are linked has become a topic for theoretical engagement and debate. Whether as ‘popcorn protests’ which spontaneously erupt or as more consciously organized revolts sometimes termed a ‘rebellion of the poor’ (Alexander et al., 2013), service delivery protests take place more or less a thousand times each year, with varying reports as to whether they are increasing in number and intensity. According to Carin Runciman et al. (2016: 44), community protests comprised about 22 percent of all police-recorded protests in South Africa from 1997 to 2013. From 2009 to 2013 there were typically 2–3 community protests per day and a peak of 5 per day in 2012 (Runciman et al., 2016: 48–49, Appendix 4). Protesters typically call on a municipal councilor or official to provide better water, sanitation, electricity, roads, stormwater drainage, clinics and other municipal services and often demand jobs in the process. However, the main problem remains the ‘scale jumping’ to national government, because it is in the Treasury that the central-to-local subsidies are determined and is the parastatal Eskom that sets electricity tariffs. It is in national public policy that service standards and subsidization strategies are set, which municipalities have to pursue. The failure of protesters to think nationally and locally, and to also act nationally while continuing to mobilize locally, characterizes these protests and helps explain their failures to generate widespread commons politics.

The central government typically ignores the protests, although in extreme cases, a national politician will visit the scene and typically provide platitudes, without proving a real commitment to changing the underlying conditions. Such a commitment would interfere with national fiscal constraints and neoliberal policies. This is especially true when it comes to water and electricity access. When the opposite takes place, protesters are surprised. This is, for example, the case of late 2017 when the students demanding free tertiary education pleasantly received

the information that then President Zuma had agreed that 90 percent of students (those from the middle class and below) would not have to pay fees in future. This was the second major commoning victory in public policy – the decommodification of education – following TAC's medicines decommodification a dozen years earlier.

What is also missing in South Africa's urban civil society sphere is a coherent ideology: specifically an anti-racist, feminist, eco-socialism that can transcend intra- and inter-urban competitive tendencies and generate the kinds of social movements and political parties that, for example, Southern European city protests seem to have embraced since 2011, especially in Athens, Barcelona and Madrid. In the years ahead, there is nevertheless a distinct possibility for utilizing struggles for the commoning of water and electricity – especially in Soweto, the huge township on the edge of Johannesburg – for the purpose of developing models for broader political strategy. In the Gramscian sense, commoning could become an implicit ideology to transcend the prevailing tendencies to commodification, atomization and individualism fostered by neoliberal hegemony.

Air, water and food commoning as prefigurative politics

Even in the absence of an explicit ideology, there are important local signs of commoning around environmental justice and urban farming. In the name of environmental justice, activist groups are taking action locally to protect water and the environment as a commons and to challenge local air, water and soil pollution by industry and mines and government inaction. Increasingly, these draw on 'citizen science' (Patel, 2009), in which residents collect air or water samples and have them tested. In one of the most polluted areas of South Africa, one hour's drive south of Johannesburg, the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance works with Save the Vaal to monitor and report river pollution. This treatment of the commons exists across class and racial divides, a notable achievement in the highly fractured South African context. This type of citizen science then places local activists' organizations in the position of informal regulator, able to demand that the state take action against polluting corporations or parastatal agencies, by providing proof of pollution and abuse of natural resources (Steward et al., 2007).

In terms of rural, community-based climate change adaptation, small-farming activists are developing surface water alternatives, monitoring their own weather data and changing crop selection to cope with climactic changes. In the Western Cape village of Goetverwacht, a local network of the community, university and local government has emerged to promote progressive land tenure agenda and make other far-reaching climate adaptations. Yet their access to water is still limited by the land being owned by the church. In this rural, isolated location, activists are compelled to work independently, providing hope that bureaucratic networks that would co-opt these groups into the state do not exercise the power to do so (Galvin et al., 2015; Galvin, unpublished).

In terms of water, a higher scale form of commoning has already been constructed by the national authority through the broader institutional frameworks established by the government, including Catchment Management Forums (CMFs), which agree on the allocation of water resources to farmers, industry, mining and other large users. Legislation specifies that 10 percent of a water course must be allocated to the 'ecological reserve,' to maintain the commons and ensure the integrity of the water supply in eco-social regards. However, in spite of their merits in theory, in practice CMFs are not formulated in a way to properly involve small users and local groups. Those that have tried to participate in CMFs report being treated in a condescending manner and sidelined (Munnik, 2015). In a more optimistic reading, van Koppen (2014) argues

that Multiple Use Water Services can be scaled up. Likewise, Woodhouse et al. (2016) show that local farmers are using irrigation systems that they designed autonomously.

In peri-urban areas such as Mzinyathi in Durban, women's garden groups support one another in a classic case of mutual aid serving as a means of coping. Their gardens offer a means of supplementing purchased foods and, if possible, selling the surplus locally. These groups have not made broader linkages and are not well profiled in the community, arguably due to their gender and class composition (Galvin, 2010). In contrast, in Soweto, urban farming is the focus of the Izindaba Zokudla network, which enjoys support from University of Johannesburg food activists. In the easily accessible markets within this dense, income-diverse township, Izindaba Zokudla has had success in developing gardens, linking to markets and engaging with the local state. Their aim is to change agricultural and food systems, but they operate with an entrepreneurial spirit and lack a concrete ideological agenda. However, the expectation in this instance is that once local farmers have a reliable platform, such as regular Soweto buyers, new opportunities can arise to challenge South Africa's notoriously concentrated retail structures and for farmers themselves to become recognized stakeholders engaging with government structures (Malan, 2015; Gwamba, 2018).

In Seawinds, in the Cape Flats outside Cape Town, outside activists with funding from conservation groups (the Table Mountain Fund and the Rufford Foundation) have built bridges with local activists. Together, they have appropriated unused land along the roadside to farm plants to be used in traditional medicine. While their work appears to challenge the state and the traditional notion of property, it has carved out space that is non-contentious and they are able to work closely in developing a win-win strategy with the state (Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation, undated). This evokes the 'guerrilla urbanism' that food commons analyst Robert Biel (2016: 113) endorses and that has the potential to '[emphasize] that the city is a human system and its emergent properties develop from its people: we cannot simply address self-organization at a technical level without also embracing struggles for emancipation and environmental justice.'

Biel (2016: 109) argues that such food struggles 'encompass both the issues of immediate material livelihood, which all revolutions must address, and the big strategic issues going beyond immediate survival: dis-alienation, human rights and real democracy; all of which tend to converge in today's land and food struggles.' Given the history of land and food in South Africa, and the dominance of privately own lands and commercial farming, land remains a struggle around which people make demands for reparations and even, in the early 2000s, built the Landless People's Movement around. But food farming itself rarely moves past material concerns into ideological ones.

From community organizing to climate adaptation

From water, food and livelihood, the notion of commoning and the paradigm of the commons could also be utilized to reinforce and define the ongoing struggles for climate change adaptation, i.e. the fights to protect low-income residents from events such as the extreme flash flooding and droughts that affected South Africa in 2016–17. To date, this has been treated as risk and disaster management, but, as a result, de-politicization of the issue accompanies state failure in even the most rudimentary support for victims of extreme weather events. Although cities have formulated adaptation plans at a city-wide level, they rarely address directly what climate change means for the poorest areas. In response, local activists, such as community organizations that are part of the GroundWork network, are challenging the strategy of transition that is being imposed from above. Instead, they are pursuing a strategy often termed 'Just Transition,' which

challenges underlying power relations and makes demands upon the state. These are still being formulated, but two examples are illustrative.

First, in the Eastern Cape's 'Wild Coast,' largely inhabited by the low-income, rural Pondo ethnic group who possess very strong traditions of fighting apartheid, a campaign has been waged since 2008 by the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC) and allies in the green network 'Sustaining the Wild Coast' (Bennie, 2017). They are opposed to the coastal extraction of titanium at the world's tenth largest deposit, in the community of Xolobeni. Instead, the ACC promotes Wild Coast eco-tourism and traditional small-scale farming. Members of the network ask simple questions that are based on the close connection between land, water, food and ecological balance: 'How can we be poor when we have land? We grow maize, sweet potatoes, taro, potatoes, onions, spinach, carrots, lemons and guavas, and we sell some of it to the market. We eat fish, eggs and chicken. This agriculture is what should be developed here' (Washinyira, 2016).

Andrew Bennie (2017) shows how villagers in search of food sovereignty have deployed agriculture as a tactic of resistance, giving literal expression to the notion that 'resistance is fertile.' Tactics like these represent a particular form of stern defiance against the plans of a fledgling business class and state elite that, to them, has long severed itself from their humble desires: to keep their land, to decide what to do with it, to welcome others to appreciate it with them and to be assisted in a forward-looking approach that seeks to build on it rather than destroy it. The ACC and its lawyers have brought the case to court, arguing that titanium mining would destroy 'the biome and ethnobotanical elements of the area. This includes reliance on the ocean, and the socio-cultural and economic value derived from the land and ocean' (ACC, 2016). A titanium smelter would also draw upon coal-fired electricity or a proposed new nuclear generator. The ACC (2016) also expressed concern that mining would disrupt plants used in traditional medicine, destroy water sources and grazing land, disturb scores of burial sites – hence 'breaking of links with ancestors' – and delimit 'self-sufficient development... Financial compensation and the provision of alternative housing for those who are physically displaced cannot adequately compensate for the destruction of a community, its culture and traditions and its members' way of life.' This narrative and the intense local struggles in which more than a dozen ACC activists have died under mysterious conditions over the past decade, testify to the fusion of desperation and power in many such settings (Bennie, 2017).

Another example is represented by the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), which has made various post-carbon development demands for the South Durban Basin, mainly in opposition to the area's massive port-petrochemical expansion (SDCEA, 2008; SDCEA, 2011; Bond, 2016a). These include defending the 'airport farmers,' a group of more than 100 land managers and workers, against displacement as the old airport becomes a potential site of redevelopment. In its campaign, SDCEA challenges the liberalized zoning that currently allows freight transport to creep into historic Clairwood, displacing thousands of black households. The reversal of the zoning would also protect and regenerate green spaces in the already toxic-saturated industrial and petrochemical areas of the city, revealing the close interconnection between the protection of livelihoods and the preservation of the environment. SDCEA's (2008) 30-page 'Spatial and Development Vision' includes demands such as 'a halt to the privatization of ocean, Bay and shore resources that belong to all the people of this country.' A lengthy follow-up statement just prior to SDCEA's (2011) co-hosting of the counter-summit to the UN climate summit in 2011 – 'Feeling the heat in Durban' – included this language: [productive-sector economic] 'localization is essential to any serious programme of mitigation and requires that national resources should be focused on supporting people's capacities to direct local development... We call for people's energy sovereignty founded on democratic and local control.'

Contradictions in commoning

In every case of community-based adaptation to climate change, it is critical to interrogate the way in which the framing and the strategies are presented and articulated. It is rare for civil society groups to make connections between the less tangible impacts of climate change and systemic aspects of a capitalist system that thrives on the extraction, production and emission of hydrocarbons. Because of the different perspectives, vocabularies, interests and confrontations, opportunities to 'connect the dots' between struggles are often not taken up. In other cases, connections are made, albeit with a strong ideological orientation. This is the case, for example, of the rural Goedverwacht community in the Western Cape (Rodina et al., 2017). The challenge is for urban groups to assert their agency through climate commoning, while beginning to draw out larger lessons. The so-far disconnected struggles over water, food and climate are illustrative of the potentials, but also the pitfalls, of bottom-up mobilization.

Two critical contradictions immediately emerge. First, the concept of water as a commons as with both a political and managerial role has been successfully applied in contexts (such as Soweto) that are not particularly water-stressed. Residents are not competing for scarce water resources supplied by inadequate bulk systems; they do not suffer limits on intermediate infrastructure such as pipe width and pumping station size.

Second, the commoning of water or electricity in the form of 'self-reticulation' or 'illegal connections' has certain negative impacts on people's quality of life. There is no universally agreed redefinition of access, so idiosyncratic action can have a negative impact on the water or electricity supply system as a whole. For example, debilitating water leaks due to faulty informal plumbing connections and electricity outages due to inadequate circuit breakers are unintended consequences of activists' reconnection strategy. Mitigating against this danger requires an understanding within and between local areas of the wider political strategy of commoning. The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee is one of the institutions that regularly addresses these problems, as well as the continual danger of electrocution when the power grid is informally accessed – as applies to 80 percent of Soweto – with the occasional tragic result of deaths, especially of children who step onto loose, live wiring.

Taking water as the topic of concern, the critical question is whether the level of social organization and trust within the broader society allows the commoning and reconnection approach to go beyond the individual household scale and be adopted into the broader hydrological system. There is a need to 'jump scale' for the sake of expanding genuine commoning of water, from the atomistic household to a catchment-level residential population. This partly depends on whether social organization and trust within a specific and well-organized community can extend to catchment-wide water planning.

To take one example, in some parts of North America, citizens have banded together as 'Riverkeepers' (in spirit of Robert Putnam's 'social capital') and protect the water commons and the health of river systems by extending their local actions to the level of the whole river. Without the pressure of scale constraints (thanks to strong communications systems) and without the concern with basic survival that makes so many South Africans think locally and act locally (only), activists in the Global North have the luxury of organizing together horizontally and vertically across space and scale, so as to protect their water resources at the source and consumption site together. In addition, within what might be termed the 'Global South within the North' (e.g. Flint, Michigan), water activists did make this jump along the socio-hydrological system, but too late – only after a river source was switched to save money and hence poisoned the mainly low-income users. In the Global North, activists can normally use trust in broader-based geographically expansive alliances and in very few cases there is no immediate threat to

water coming out of their tap. Activists have thus the luxury to work together using a citizen-science approach to monitor water quality, drawing immediate attention to pollution and challenging polluters whether upstream or downstream.

Some sites in South Africa have this capacity, such as South Durban, where rapid-alert systems have been established to protect the air from excessive pollution, or in the Vaal, where environmentalists have begun to monitor water quality. But in most parts of the country, activists are far from being able to achieve a commons-like approach based on bottom-up coordination. Societal trust has been eroded into collective individualism. This is evident in peri-urban areas like Mzinyathi, a black residential area within Durban city limits, but located outside the 'Urban Development Line' (UDL). That location demarcates areas with formal sewer lines available to those with closer-in housing from those further away who reside in what was a former 'KwaZulu' homeland area. Since these lines were drawn, Mzinyathi has witnessed extremely rapid urbanization, with middle class households moving into what were formally rural areas. There they suffer parallel 'traditional governance' (i.e., ethnic-patriarchal) power structures but, at the same time, they receive free water. The water utility indicates that it plans to provide metered water infrastructure with greater flow capacity, so as to charge for the increased supply. However, at present, all water in this area is free, since administratively the city has been unable to charge individual households due to the collective land tenure, in which ethnic overlords manage residential allocations.

With the influx of middle-class (black) households who have a higher consumption level, the Mzinyathi water system is unable to cope with much larger flows of water demanded by a rising population. Household taps provide high-pressure water, rather than the 300 liters per household per day provided in containers (at low pressure) that poor households receive. But as a result of the increased consumption, areas further north of Mzinyathi on the same water pipeline have suffered for lengthy periods with no water. These lower-income citizens are thus forced to rely on water tankers from the city due to the easy (and free) access that is enjoyed by citizens who are economically and socially better off. Everyone in the area understands that it is this 'overuse' of free, unlimited water by new households that prevents other areas further down the pipeline from having any water. Under ideal circumstances, in which commoning was widely accepted, a community meeting and an agreement would be all that is needed to share the available water fairly and to halt the overconsumption by some that prevents other people's access. Yet without that level of simple social organization and ethos of sharing equally in Mzinyathi, it is 'every household for itself.' The ethnic leaders – Zulu chiefs – have little to contribute to a solution.

As a result, consumer expropriation using illegal connections to access unlimited free water is a short-term tactic that may help achieve positive outcomes for households, whether in Detroit or Soweto, but with potential, unintended, adverse consequences. Activists see this as decommodifying the water commons and winning their 'Right to the City.' But in the case of Mzinyathi and countless others, this approach often leads to long disruptions of the water system due to leaks that are the consequence of people's self-connection and excessive use upstream that leaves very little left over downstream along the pipe (often with high levels of wastage). The same is true of illegal electricity connections, in which the individual household's access may put at risk the entire neighborhood's supply, given the frequency of brown-outs that correlate to the amount of stress on the power system when the circuit breakers trip. In the context of systemic deprivation, it requires enormous skill and organization to generate a horizontal and diverse movement that both fights against excessive payment by poor people and reinforces respect for natural resources and social connections to the Earth.

In parts of the world where there is a high level of trust and social capital, communities may manage and protect their own resources, even though they struggle for water. This typically

applies to indigenous communities, whether First Nations in Canada or the collective water systems of Latin America, that are known for having a deeper connection to the land and water and a history of managing these resources. There are untapped potentials in South Africa, for example, in water court cases lodged by Lawyers for Human Rights and the Legal Resources Centre in the city of Carolina, in the province of Mpumalanga, in 2012 and by AfriForum in the Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo. Both were successful in forcing municipalities to supply water to residents. Nevertheless, they failed to use their successes to link with other groups and escalate their grievances past the local level. Often a state agency is required as an intervening force and, in a case like South Africa where both neoliberal policy and corruption are barriers, additional community organizing is needed to gain sufficient power.

The ‘Right to the City’ and to water commons in South Africa

Resistance strategies and tactics develop over time. Throughout the townships of South Africa, activists interested in guaranteeing access to water and electricity have been attempting to evolve what was already a popular survival tactic at the time of apartheid: reconnecting water and electricity illegally, once it was disconnected by state officials due to nonpayment. In 2001, 13 percent of Gauteng’s water connections were deemed to be illegal (Bond, 2002) and by 2016, Eskom announced that in Soweto the share of illegal electricity connections had risen to 80 percent (Le Cordeur, 2016). By 2018, the cumulative cost had risen to \$1 billion, which was as much as the rest of the country owed Eskom (Mahlangu, 2018). As discussed above, the most serious problem with what could be called ‘informal commoning’ is that once the water infrastructure is tapped by township plumbers (many working for a small fee), leaks are exacerbated and water quality is sometimes compromised. Likewise, as electricity lines are commoned using illegal connections, the capacity of the entire township system is stressed and the power supply regularly trips. Accidental electrocutions become more frequent as live wires criss-cross pedestrian pathways.

The typical short-term response from a Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee activist is to embark upon technical training, stressing insulation and effective pipe repair. Autonomist and localist activists are generally comfortable with the insurgent spirit represented in such strategies, in contrast to socialists who typically argue for a future metropolitan-scale planning and redistribution so as to avoid system degradation due to illegal connections. According to the latter, bottom-up commoning should be replaced with top-down tariff reforms providing a minimal decent supply of water and electricity to all residents but penalizing high-volume (hedonistic) users so as to provide surpluses for cross-subsidization. In this conception, the class struggle occurs within the public authority over the shape and slope of the tariff curve. Here, the eco-socialist committed to both social justice and conservation (i.e. reducing wasteful demand for water and electricity) is fully aware that the state must be controlled by socialists in order for such tariffs and other reforms to be implemented.

However, hacking the water network is not the only space of intervention. Together with these survival tactics, community-based leaders such as Ngwane (2009) adopt a strategic approach that links the locality of community with the global character of ecological processes, mainly through questioning the bulk supply of water to Johannesburg from Lesotho mega-dams and of electricity from coal-fired power stations, because ‘The climate crisis can only be solved if the profit motive is severely restricted or eliminated altogether. Capitalism is incapable of solving the ecological crisis because it is the main culprit.’

Our argument about commoning is premised on the reality that there are limits to the use of constitutional rights. If the objective of those promoting the ‘Right to the City’ includes

making water primarily an eco-social and decommodified good, these constitutional limits will have to be transcended. Yet there are differences of opinion about the next logical step on how to move beyond commoning to eco-socialism. Some argue that the scope for change is limited to engaging with the present state. The strengthening of free basic water provision is one strategy derived from such an approach. But doing so requires raising the scale of politics from the local to the national level (Galvin, 2016). It is at that level that commoning can be achieved, both horizontally across the populace and vertically from the raindrop above or borehole below, all the way to the sewage outfall and the sea. But to get to the next mode of financing, extraction, production, distribution and disposal of water requires a formidable social force to take us through and beyond rights, to the commons.

Conclusion

We have observed in this South African exploration of commoning's potentials and contradictions that the crucial missing link in many sites of informal water, food and climate politics is an eco-socialist (and also hopefully feminist and anti-racist) ideology. The ideological deficit is not a problem unique to South Africa. As Frantz Fanon (1969: 186) once remarked, 'For my part the deeper I enter into the cultures and the political circles, the surer I am that the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology.' After all, neoliberals are extremely forceful, moving their arguments deep into the terrain of commoning. One multilateral agency profoundly committed to urban private property rights, Habitat (2014: 7) argues that 'The "Commons" reinforce the social function of property and that of the city as a whole, while recognizing the dynamism of private assets.'

In contrast, the challenge for South Africans committed to a different society, economy and city is to humbly combine the limited gains that social movements have won so far (in many cases matched by regular defeats on economic terrain) with the soaring ambitions that are needed to match the scale of the systemic crisis and the current extent of social protest. The irony is that the upsurge of recent protest of a 'popcorn' character – i.e. rising quickly in all directions but then immediately subsiding – screams out for the kind of organization that once worked so well in parts of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. Moreover, there are ideological, strategic and material problems that South Africa's independent left has failed to overcome, including the division between autonomist and socialist currents and the lack of mutual respect for various left traditions, including traditional communism, Trotskyism, anarchism, syndicalism, Black Consciousness and feminism. A synthetic approach from the top down still appears impossible.

Dignity is ultimately the outcome of a struggle in which not simply individual demands for rights, but collective solutions – e.g. the full-fledged bulk infrastructure required for sanitation – are achieved, once political parties (perhaps the Economic Freedom Fighters, the leftist movement that began in 2013) gain sufficient state power to answer the demands of social movements (Bond, 2016b). The next generation of South African urban activists will have learned the prior movements' lessons and will have less and less satisfaction with constitutionalism, as it becomes clearer how courts protect property in times of stress and as the police react to protest with more violence. *En route*, society is girding for degeneration into far worse conditions than now prevail: a post-apartheid South Africa that is more economically unequal, more environmentally unsustainable and more justified in fostering anger-ridden grassroots expectations than during apartheid itself. One of the central questions, once dust settles following battle after battle and activists compare notes, is whether the cadres find they can use commoning as a strategy towards an ideology and practice more robustly eco-socialist in character.

Notes

- 1 The literature about the South African transition and its limitations to progress in various sectors includes works by Alexander (2002); Ballard et al. (2006); Bell and Ntsebeza (2003); Desai (2002); Cock (2011); Hart (2002); Hassim (2006); Marais (2001); Mhone and Edigheji (2003); Naidoo (2007); Ntsebeza (2005); Padayachee and Habib (2000); Shivambu (2015); Terreblanche (2002); van Driel (2003); and Webster and Adler (1995).
- 2 Traditionally white areas had credit meters, revealing the municipality's higher levels of trust in the higher-income residents.

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